

A Connoisseur of Happiness

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A couple of years back, I got a phone call from a friend who had attended a Dhamma talk where the teacher had said that “life is suffering” is the second noble truth. The friend called up to scoff at the teacher, saying that, of course, everyone knows that that’s not the second noble truth, that’s the first noble truth. And I had to tell him that it wasn’t any noble truth. The Buddha never said that life is suffering. He said there is suffering in life. That was his first noble truth. And he identified what that suffering is, but he went on to say that there is a cause for suffering that you can abandon, and there is a path to the end of suffering that you can develop, so that you can reach the end of suffering, all of which can be found in life.

So life isn’t just suffering. It’s important to underline that point, because so many people misunderstand the Buddha’s attitude toward happiness and suffering. Just this last weekend, I heard someone saying that the Buddha’s basic teachings are that all things are inconstant and all things are suffering. That’s not the case, either. As the Buddha once said, if there were no pleasure in the five aggregates, we wouldn’t be attached to them. They do offer pleasure. And we need to understand the different kinds of pleasure they offer, so we can use that pleasure as a means to the highest happiness or the highest pleasure: *nibbana*.

The Pali word for pleasure and happiness is *sukha*. It’s one of the Buddha’s most basic terms, and—as is so often the case with the most central terms in the Buddha’s teachings—he doesn’t define it. *Sukha* can be translated as bliss, pleasure, ease, wellbeing, or happiness. What the Buddha does describe in detail are the different levels of *sukha* and the different ways that *sukha* functions. In other words, he describes what’s practical to know about *sukha* so that you can know which kinds of *sukha* to pursue and which to avoid.

I think one of the reasons he doesn’t define *sukha* is because, as you practice, your sense of what counts as happiness is going to develop and get more refined. So it’s important that your idea of happiness doesn’t get nailed down too tightly when you’re starting out.

The Buddha’s own search was a search for true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t age, grow ill, or die. That’s what he was looking for. After having spent years indulging in the intense sensual pleasures of the palace, he did what so many people do when they have been indulging in sensual pleasure that way: He went to the other extreme and practiced austerities—in his case, for six years. He denied himself food, forced himself not to breathe, and grew very emaciated because he was afraid of pleasure. One of the most important insights of that period, though, was that denying yourself any kind of pleasure at all is not the way. It doesn’t lead to liberation.

So then the question arose in his mind: Is there another way? And he thought of the time when he was a child, sitting under a tree, and had entered the first *jhana*: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. Recollecting that, he had an instinctive sense that that would be the path, but then he asked himself: “Why am I afraid of that pleasure?” And he realized it was nothing to be afraid of. It wasn’t intoxicating; it didn’t cause any harm to anyone.

Those are the two defining aspects of any pleasure that’s unskillful: It’s harmful and it’s intoxicating. We see so many pleasures in life that involve oppressing other people. The people enjoying those pleasures may not be conscious of the fact that they’re causing oppression or hardship. To whatever extent they do notice, they’ll often close their minds to it and deny that it’s causing anybody any harm—or if it *is* causing somebody harm, it’s causing harm to people or beings who don’t matter. That attitude is one of the things that makes that pleasure unskillful. Not only does it harm other people, but it also fosters unskillful qualities of indifference and lack of shame.

Intoxicating pleasure is the kind that dulls the mind so you can't really see what you're doing. The most obvious examples of this sort of pleasure are those that come from alcohol and drugs, but there are other intoxicating pleasures as well. Anything that excites a very strong addiction, that dulls the mind, dulls your perceptions: That's a kind of pleasure to be avoided.

The pleasure of jhana, though, is neither harmful nor intoxicating. Sometimes modern Dhamma teachers will warn you about the dangers of getting attached to the pleasures of jhana, that somehow they're a major peril to be avoided and feared, but the Buddha never talked in those terms. Quite the contrary: He said that if you don't have the pleasure of jhana or something better than that, you won't be able to let go of your attachments to sensual pleasures.

To let go of a lower-level pleasure, you need something higher to hold on to, something to substitute for it. Otherwise, you go sneaking back to your old ways, denying the fact that you're doing that. Or you grow attached to your pride that you're so strong, so resilient, and so tough in the practice that you don't need pleasure—but then that pride becomes a major obstacle to seeing where the mind is actually looking to feed. As the Buddha said, the pleasure of jhana is a necessary part of the practice. It's the kind of happiness that allows you to have a sense of wellbeing, a sense of nourishment along the way, and yet keeps the mind clear so that it sees what it's doing.

The Buddha actually talks of jhana in terms of food. He says we feed on rapture when we meditate. And he describes jhana as a storehouse of provisions. He compares the practice as a whole to building and maintaining a fortress on a frontier. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper who knows whom to let in and whom to keep out. Discernment is the well-plastered wall that the enemy can't climb because they can't gain a foothold on the plaster. Persistence is your army of soldiers. And jhana is your storehouse of grain, honey, oil: all the food you need in order to keep the gatekeeper and the army strong. So the pleasure of jhana is a necessary part of the practice. It keeps you nourished.

As for the danger of getting attached to that nourishment, I can find only one passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about the danger of jhana, and it's relatively minor. He says that once you can attain jhana and you decide you don't want to go any further, it's like holding a stick covered with sap, and your hand gets stuck to the stick because of the sap. But jhana doesn't make it impossible to get unstuck. In fact, you need the stillness of jhana to look objectively at the pleasures you've been attached to so far in your life, to see that they're no match for the pleasures of concentration. Only then are you encouraged to ask yourself: Are there any drawbacks to this state of concentration? Is there something better than this? That reflection becomes a solvent that removes the sap from your hands.

In any event, I don't know anyone who's killed anyone, stolen anything, or broken any of the other precepts through attachment to jhana. But you look at the way people are attached to sensual pleasures: It's the source for a lot of the cruelty, heartlessness, and thoughtlessness in the world, all the harm that people cause one another. If you're not attached to the pleasure of jhana, if you don't have that available, you're going to sneak back to the types of pleasure that can cause all kinds of harm to yourself and to others.

So don't be afraid of the pleasure of jhana. Don't try to avoid it for fear that you'll get stuck. Of course you're going to get stuck, at least for a while, but you're stuck on the kind of pleasure that allows you to clarify the mind. That way you can begin to see what's going on, where you're stuck, and how to get unstuck. This is an important part of noble right concentration: not simply that you get into the different levels of jhana, but that the mind can then step back while you're in the jhana to examine the state of jhana while you're still within its range. The Buddha gives the analogy of a person sitting who's watching someone who's lying down, or a person standing who's watching someone sitting. In other words, you're above and behind your own state of concentration, and you can see what's going on.

Or you could compare it to having your hand in a glove: When you're fully in the glove of jhana, you can't observe it. But when you pull the glove off a bit, without totally removing it from your hand, you can look around at the mind inside the glove. That way you thoroughly comprehend how the mind relates to its

object, which gives you insight into the process of fabrication.

This is where fabrication becomes clearest: when you're in a state of strong concentration and you can see the movements of the mind very clearly. Ultimately, you reach the point where you decide that even the pleasure of jhana is not pleasant enough; it's not peaceful enough, because of the instabilities of fabrication. You want something more peaceful, something more solid than fabrication can make.

So it's not that you stop aiming at happiness and pleasure. It's just that your idea of happiness and pleasure gets more refined. This is when you can let go of the jhana and, through insight into the process of fabrication, allow the fabrication to stop. You no longer try to fabricate anything out of what you've got in the present moment. That's when the mind opens up in an unexpected way to something that's not fabricated. And the realization hits: that when the Buddha said there is a deathless happiness, he knew what he was talking about. You've got your evidence right here. You see very clearly the stress that's involved even in the fabrication of a very subtle pleasure of concentration, because you've got something better, the unfabricated, to compare it to.

So the Buddha is not teaching you to be a stoic with a stiff upper lip, denying yourself any pleasure or happiness. He himself was actually a connoisseur of pleasure. He wanted only the highest happiness. And he found it. As for us, he wants us to want only the highest happiness, and to practice so we can find it, too. He didn't say that pleasure is bad or that numbness is good, but he did say that different levels of pleasure have different effects on the mind. You want to look at the pleasure you find in different aspects of your life to see which kinds of pleasure are harmful and intoxicating, and which ones help to clear the mind. The ones that clear the mind include not only the pleasure of concentration, but also the pleasure of generosity and the pleasure of observing the precepts. The Buddha talks about how the practice of generosity and the precepts gives rise to a sense of joy, a sense of wellbeing, that then becomes a basis for concentration.

From there, you develop the more refined levels of pleasure that come with concentration. As the mind grows clearer and clearer, you get to the ultimate pleasure, one totally free from disturbance, because it lies outside of space and time.

Years back, I attended a commemoration for Ajaan Lee's passing. It was the last commemoration I attended before I returned to the States. They had invited a senior monk from Bangkok to give the concluding Dhamma talk of the commemoration, but about 15 minutes before he was scheduled to get up on the Dhamma seat, he still hadn't arrived. They got a phone call from him, that he was stuck in traffic and wouldn't be able to make it in time. So they asked one of the forest ajaans to get up and give a talk instead. His talk was about how the central teaching of the Buddha was about suffering and stress. He talked for an hour about the four noble truths, with his major focus on the truth of suffering, suffering, suffering. Just a few minutes after he had finished, the senior monk from Bangkok finally arrived. So they asked him to get up on the sermon seat and give a talk, too. He hadn't heard what the previous talk was. He got up and he said the Buddha's central teaching was all about happiness.

And you know, both were right. The Buddha talked about suffering because he wanted us to see the suffering we tend not to see, so we can look for a higher happiness, and not just for the kind of happiness with which we tend to content ourselves.

So when the Buddha talked about *dukkha*, suffering or stress, he wasn't just saying that life is miserable and all you can do is accept the fact. He was saying that there is suffering but it doesn't have to be there. There's the suffering of the three characteristics, which is inherent in fabricated things. But on top of that is the suffering in the four noble truths, which is caused by craving and clinging. That kind of suffering you can put an end to. And when you put an end to it, the suffering of the three characteristics no longer weighs on the mind because you've found something that lies beyond what's fabricated.

So the Buddha talked about suffering for the sake of happiness, for the sake of true happiness. He was like a doctor. When you go to see the doctor and he asks you, "Okay, what's wrong? Where does it hurt?" he's not being pessimistic. He focuses on your illness because he has a cure. The Buddha described himself as a

doctor. He focused on stress and suffering because he had a cure, leading to the health of true happiness.

Always keep this point in mind as you practice. We're not here to run away from pleasure. We're here to see what pleasure really is, and become connoisseurs of pleasure, distinguishing between which kind of pleasure, when you indulge in it, has harmful results, and which kind of pleasure, when you indulge in it, becomes part of the path—so that you can find the ultimate pleasure that doesn't require indulgence at all. It's just there. That's what we're practicing for.